DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 415 HE 004 225

AUTHOR	Ward, F. Champion
TITLE	Social Progress and the Liberal Arts College.
INSTITUTION	Ford Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE	1 Jun 70
NOTE	11p.; Address delivered at the 121st Commencement of Southwestern at Memphis, Tennessee, June 1, 1970
AVAILABLE FROM	Ford Foundation, Office of Reports, 320 East 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10017
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Colleges; *Educational Change; *Educational Needs; *Higher Education; *Liberal Arts; *Social Influences; Speeches; Universities

ABSTRACT

This speech recoginizes some of the problems and criticism facing liberal arts institutions. Criticisms concerning elitist, classbound, and detached institutions are examined. Recommendations suggest student, faculty and institutional actions and policies that can relate the liberal arts college more usefully to the social progress of the nation. (MJM)

ED 077415

Social Progress and the Liberal Arts College

By F. Champion Ward
A Ford Foundation Reprint

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

Mr. Ward is vice president of the Education and Research Division of the Ford Foundation. The following address was delivered at the 121st Commencement of Southwestern at Memphis, June 1, 1970.

A note on Foundation-assisted programs in undergraduate education will be found on page 9.

Additional copies of this reprint, as well as a complete list of other Foundation publications, may be obtained by writing the Ford Foundation, Office of Reports, 320 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 10017.

SR/43

A marked feature of this nation's present travail is that so many social institutions we once took for granted have lost the benefit of the doubt and are being subjected to a unique degree of questioning.

The college of liberal arts is no exception. Indeed, it unites so many of the characteristics now being attributed to American society as a whole that to ponder its future is in a way to consider the fate of American society itself "writ small."

I do not refer to certain long-familiar criticisms of the liberal arts college—that it is destined to disappear as a distinct stage between the improved high school and the expanding university, that it enrolls a diminishing minority of American students, and that it cannot meet its bills. For years, it has been possible to prove that colleges like Southwestern cannot exist, but that judgment is somewhat muted now. For one thing, the colleges are still here. Secondly, the students, if not all of their professors, seem insistent that college should be something other than a staging-area between high school and graduate school. This has given the colleges a new opportunity to define their *raison d'être*. Thirdly, the relatively small size of the colleges now seems to be a great advantage, in view of the central role that excessive numbers have played in alienating students and engendering turbulence in the large universities.

The criticisms heard most often now are that the colleges cultivate detachment without commitment, or conversely that they cultivate commitment without detachment.

Elitist or Subversive? The charge that liberal arts colleges are in some ways frivolous and irrelevant, that they discourage commitment at a time of crisis, comes in large part from what might be called the new sociology of education. From this perspective, the college is viewed as a privileged sanctuary for the fortunate, purveying polite learning to the already polite. Critics with a taste for history point out that liberal education as originated in Greece was designed for a leisure class which depended for that leisure upon the labors of a large mass of slaves whose training, if any, was confined to what we now call vocational education.

Viewing the college from a psychological perspective, these critics charge that the prominence given to reason and intellectual discipline in liberal education prevents the expression of authentic feeling and dampens personal commitment to right action. Somehow, in the course of their liberal education, the healthy instincts and natural goodness of the young are "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

Quite contrary to the charge that liberal education is bland and ineffectual is the allegation that it is effective to the point of subverting American institutions. In one of its forms, this is an old charge typified by an Englishman's complaint to a friend of mine that he rather disliked discussion because it "irritates individuals and disturbs institutions." We all know the terms of this venerable quarrel. An idea that may be liberating to a student or professor seems threatening to somebody else, and we are all familiar with the kind of old grad who accused Woodrow Wilson, when he was president of Princeton, of trying "to turn [his] old school into an educational institution."

But now this charge of subversion has taken a new turn. The revolt against civility and the life of the mind on the part of many students and some younger faculty has made even the traditional critics of liberal education suddenly respectful of the ivory tower. The colleges that once had to struggle to defend academic freedom and the right of free inquiry are now urged to stick to those hard-won gains and to control and suppress the social activism of their students. The insidious threat of long-term subversion through the power of general ideas now seems mild compared with the headlong plunge into social reality that appears to be in prospect.

Examining the Charges. Let us look first at the charge that liberal arts colleges are class-bound and elitist. There is troubling evidence that the colleges have, indeed, made less difference to collegians than collegians have made to the colleges. A recent study* of the presumptive effects of a wide range of colleges on their students indicated strongly that

*Alexander W. Astin, "Undergraduate Achievement and Institutional Excellence," Science, 161 (1968).

if you take in nice freshmen you will graduate nice seniors. With only a very few exceptions, the colleges in this study appeared to be, quite literally, finishing schools. They polished, but they did not shape, their students.

Riesman and Jencks' study* of the evolution of American higher education seems also to bear out the charge that historically colleges have reflected society far more than they have influenced it. On the whole, higher education has expanded *with* the middle class and at the same time has contributed to the widening gap between the middle class and the poor who lack access to and preparation for college. A recent report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education showed that in spite of the tremendous expansion of higher education in recent years, only 7 per cent of the children of fourth quartile income families attend college, as against 48 per cent of first quartile families, making it almost seven times more likely that a child of affluent parents will attend college than that a child of poor parents will do so. Perhaps more significant is the fact that in the highest ability group for college prospects as a whole, it is twice as likely that a student of high ability in the top socio-economic quartile will attend college as that a student of equivalent ability in the lowest socio-economic quartile will. This is a net loss to the nation in the recognition and development of that "natural aristocracy of virtue and talent" which Thomas Jefferson urged American education to search out and cultivate.

There is also truth in the charge that the life of the mind can be pursued in such a way as to stop too far short of the moral and practical consequences of ideas, and thus to induce a kind of paralysis, even when the need for action is obvious. Taken together with the class origin of liberal arts students, the result has been graduates who have learned in college to be nice to each other but neglectful of everyone else.

Let us look now at the opposite complaint, that the colleges are becoming all too successful in engaging students (and even faculties and administrators) in direct efforts to effect specific changes in American society and the world. At the moment, critics who are afraid

*Riesman and Jencks, *The Academic Revolution*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1968.

the colleges will do too little are outnumbered by those who fear that they may do too much. Again, nostalgia has appeared for the days when football and surfing diverted the student mind and joined it reassuringly to the mind of its elders. Among students, the sense that intellectual work is a form of fiddling while Rome burns has grown very strong. "In the beginning was the *deed*," says the new activism, which sees commitment to social action as the end, not the by-product, of true education. It is sometimes said that a new immorality accompanies this critique of reason. It seems more accurate to say that an intense, reforming moralism has replaced cultivation of the intellectual virtues. The spirit of Savonarola is now stronger than that of Epicurus.

Worried observers can find much to deplore in this tendency. When spontaneity is confused with sincerity, when conviction is thought to justify coercion, and when form, especially "good form," is assumed to be both the effect and the cause of hypocrisy, there is, indeed, reason for concern. Sound learning could have reduced such excess. For example, the fervent conviction of so many of the rising generation that their country has been uniquely wicked in its international conduct might be less absolute if they could remember Thucydides, whose great history would remind them that "sacred egoism" has always motivated nation states. As Thucydides put it, in international politics "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." But when there is no Thucydides to remember, the latest example of such conduct becomes the only case in point.

Similarly, the turmoil and dissension that are now straining the social fabric of the United States might be viewed more hopefully if they could be perceived in the perspective of de Tocqueville's prediction, made in Andrew Jackson's time, that in America the principle of social equality will painfully but irresistibly expand until most* of American society enjoys its fruits. In such a perspective, we might realize that what at first seems like a cardiac arrest in our body politic is in fact nervous indigestion following a large intake of social progress.

*Most, but not all, unless American society confutes de Tocqueville's ominous view of its racial dilemma.

Again, students might feel less dismay in the face of their elders' detachment and apparent indifference to so many crying needs, if they had read Santayana and remembered that he once said, surveying the whole span of human life, "The young man who will not weep is a savage, and the old man who will not laugh is a fool."

Reconciling Commitment and Detachment. Yet it seems clear that sound learning is not a full cure for what is wrong and that the present discontent will not be removed simply by insisting that there is nothing the matter with liberal education as traditionally pursued. Fortunately, the colleges are beginning to debate and refine the questions their critics have been putting to them. It is still too early to know what sort of synthesis will result from this deliberative effort. But some promising starts have been made recently, designed to reconcile action and direct experience with theoretical studies. This attempt to combine commitment with detachment is extremely intricate and difficult. The first difficulty is in finding the right "mix" of theory and practice within the curriculum; the second is in determining the appropriate contribution of a liberal arts college to the solution of national problems. There is now a widespread effort to develop courses of study that have substantial intellectual content and yet force both faculty and students to lay out a plan of possible action to cope with particular problems of the hour. I say "both faculty and students," because I believe that courses originating with both rather than with either separately have the best chance of combining perspective and relevance. Take, for example, a group of courses that students and faculty at Stanford University developed around some complex questions of social policy in California. I recently read the product of one of the Stanford seminars, a report entitled "Logging in Urban Counties," produced by a group of eleven students under the supervision of Stanford geophysicist Allan Cox, who reported:

"We all learned a great deal. The students discovered that it isn't enough to write essays — lawmakers and supervisors require hard facts if they're going to act.

"This is what we had to go after — with field

trips, in talks with county officials and people in the logging industry, and by reading published research. The students got extremely interested—it really turned them on."

Some class members sided with the lumber industry at the outset, Professor Cox added, and some with the conservationists. In the end both sides came to feel that the interests of both logging and conservation could be protected if the proper steps were taken.

"Our study indicates," Professor Cox went on, "that sustained-yield logging is not only economically sound, but that it is at least as profitable in the long run as clear-cutting (removing all trees). Moreover, recreational use of the land and logging are compatible if the logging is done carefully under the direction of a skilled forester."

What is impressive about this Stanford seminar is the way older and younger minds combined established knowledge, reasoned analysis, and fact-getting to move from contrary clichés concerning a controversial social question to an agreed-upon, workable solution. State and county legislators in California are now making use of the group's report.

There are also institutional actions and policies that can relate the liberal arts college more usefully than in the recent past to the social progress of this nation. Most important and appropriate among these is the decision of many strong colleges whose student bodies were previously drawn from a single class to admit intelligent students who, through the handicap either of class or race or both, have been badly prepared for college.

I do not for a moment underrate the great financial, pedagogical, and social difficulties that face such an undertaking. It is sure, for a while, to reduce civility and raise the temperature. It will occasion criticism, misunderstanding, and self-doubt. But if it succeeds, it will prove the Marxists wrong in their charge that in American society education is simply a means by which one class or race maintains its advantage over another. And such a success will prove once more that the United States is unique in the height of its aspirations, if not yet in their fulfillment—a reminder of the old American paradox, that if we had not already done so much we would not still have so much to do.

FOUNDATION GRANTS FOR UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

The Ford Foundation has long been engaged in assisting efforts to strengthen liberal arts colleges generally and to improve the quality of undergraduate education. In the 1950s grants totaling $260 million went to the nation's 630 four-year, accredited private colleges and universities to help raise faculty salaries. A special program of the 1960s provided general support totaling $121.7 million to 67 selected liberal arts colleges to improve their financial viability, raise faculty salaries, add to plant and equipment, and offer more scholarships and other forms of student aid.

As part of the effort to broaden the intellectual and cultural horizons of undergraduate students the Foundation has made grants to introduce studies of Asia, Africa, and other non-Western areas into the curricula of more than twenty liberal arts colleges. The Foundation has also supported independent study programs and experiments designed to relate studies to contemporary issues.

Efforts to modernize undergraduate education were assisted through grants to several experimental colleges and innovative programs, beginning in the late 1950s, in Texas, Michigan, Vermont, and New York. More recently, in 1969, $1 million in general support was given to New College in Sarasota, Florida, which features a three-year B.A. program of unusual sophistication and intensity coupled with close student-teacher working relations. In 1967 a $3 million grant helped launch Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, an experimental college associated with four nearby institutions, Amherst, the University of Massachusetts, Smith, and Mount Holyoke. Opening in Fall 1970, Hampshire will stress independent learning through intensive training in methods of inquiry, and experiment with student-led seminars.

Beginning in 1964, seven colleges received grants to enable gifted students to pursue their entire undergraduate education through independent study. Other initiatives in independent study are linked to student desires for greater social significance in their education. In 1968, for example, a grant to the Associated Students of the California Institute of

Technology enabled twenty black students to spend half a school year at Caltech's Student Research Center. Working with undergraduates from Caltech and seven nearby institutions, they undertook a full-scale investigation of air pollution. A similar grant the following year enabled students at the University of Massachusetts, the Federal City College in Washington, D.C., and the University of South Carolina to do research, for credit, on such subjects as poverty in Appalachia and the social consequences of increased leisure.

Combined work-study programs that allow students to gain experience relevant to their social concerns have been assisted at a variety of colleges. For example, in 1969 Haverford College received a grant to enable students from Haverford and three other colleges in the Philadelphia area to live and work for an academic semester or longer in poor city neighborhoods. The purpose of the program is to prepare the students to deal intelligently with urban problems and to help them communicate their new awareness to their largely white, middle-class colleges and home communities.

Grants totaling nearly $30 million since 1967 have supported a variety of efforts to increase and improve opportunities for blacks and other minorities in higher education. To give just a few examples: predominantly Negro colleges have been helped to develop their libraries, increase student services, strengthen freshman studies, and improve undergraduate studies in the social sciences. Ethnic studies programs have been supported at predominantly white and predominantly Negro colleges. Assistance has also been provided to predominantly white colleges to help organize new programs of orientation, counseling, and tutoring for minority students; to urban public colleges to deal directly with specific local minority problems; and to consortia of colleges to encourage cooperative, multi-institutional efforts to improve the quality of service offered to minorities. Grants have also been made to the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students and other organizations to guide and counsel young blacks at the point of entry into college. In 1970, the Foundation launched a special project to identify and help minority graduates of two-year colleges continue in four-year institutions. A grant

of $300,000 for two years is supporting a test run of the project in Michigan and Illinois.

The Foundation has also given grants to universities trying to offset the impersonalization that invariably accompanies large enrollments. One such grant went to the University of Washington for a new Division of General and Interdisciplinary Studies, which will experiment with problem-oriented courses and seminars for freshmen and sophomores. Another went to the University of Vermont for an experimental community of selected students and faculty, living and studying together as a self-governing residential college within the larger university community.

The Foundation also has supported studies analyzing the far-reaching changes and the widespread upheavals that are currently besetting American colleges and universities. A $475,000 grant to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is supporting a wide-ranging examination of goals and governance in higher education, including questions that directly concern undergraduate divisions, such as: Should the existing governing structure be changed? What roles should students have in instruction and research? What are the implications of open enrollment? Is the present system of professorial appointment, tenure, and advancement conducive to good teaching?

In 1970, the Foundation inaugurated a program of Venture Funds to help innovative undergraduate education at some ten to twelve colleges and universities annually in various parts of the United States. Grants may be used as the recipients see fit. The aim is to provide colleges with a small discretionary fund that will allow deans or presidents to act quickly in support of new ideas, experiments, or reforms.